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ABSTRACT

In the 1980's, the well-being and enhancement of community colleges will require not only instructional and programmatic excellence, but also a well conceived, continuous, and systematic program of public information to foster and maintain community support for the institution. The college president must create the climate, establish the structural mechanisms, and ensure the money and resources to make a comprehensive information program work. The chief community information staff person must be assigned a new status in the organization as a senior member of the management team, with the opportunity to influence the decision-making process relative to the impact that these decisions will have on public opinion. The primary function of the public information office is to interpret the activities of the college to the community and to help interpret and predict the pulse of the community to the college. To fulfill this function, the community information officer must: (1) know about the community being served, with particular understanding of the feelings of target segments such as business or labor leaders, politicians, and leaders of community groups; (2) have the skill to serve as an institutional spokesperson and to determine the most appropriate spokesperson for a given situation; (3) have an open, sharing, and trusting relationship with the college president; and (4) be recognized by vice presidents and deans as a college decision maker. In short, community colleges need the guidance and counsel of public information officers, who are capable of analyzing, interpreting, and predicting public reactions to the institution as well as managing a dynamic public information program. (HB)

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An NCR Monograph

March 1980

THE ROLE OF THE COLLEGIATE OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION IN THE 1980'S

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THE ROLE OF THE COLLEGIATE OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION IN THE 1980'S

NOTE: The following address was presented at the Mad II Conference of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, in January at Grossingers, New York. The National Council for Community Relations, an affiliate council of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, is dedicated to the development and practice of sound community relations in two-year colleges as well as the professional development of community relations personnel in their administrative roles in community and junior colleges.

Founded less than five years ago, the NCCR membership numbers about 300 including college presidents, deans, directors, coordinators and technical personnel -- in short, all those who see the community relations function as integral to a community-based institution of higher education.

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by Robert Kopecek
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Isn't institutional excellence enough? Can't a college stand on its record without an organized public information program? Need public information personnel be recognized as professionals whose particular expertise is required on the management team of colleges and universities? Notwithstanding the growing number of attempts by the current incumbents of public relations positions to professionalize collegiate public information (encouraged by growing concerns by senior college officials about institutional image, credibility, the need to advertise and market, and the increasing competition for funds), what role should the chief public information officer play on a campus? If the function is necessary and the people are needed, how should they relate to the president, other senior officers and the decision making process of the college, and how much should be expended to support this function?

These are some of the concerns that each generation of college administrators must consider anew. This paper asserts that the function of professionalized public information is essential to the maintenance and growth of all colleges. The question is not whether the function is legitimate and necessary, but rather how it should be accomplished. The issue is not that presidents and senior staff members need the assistance and guidance of professional public information officers, but rather how best to utilize professionals from this field. The primary focus of this paper will be on public information and the public information officer in the public community college, although the function is recognized as being essential in all of higher education.

The role and function of public information and the public information officer needs to be considered in terms of some basic assumptions. The basic mission of community colleges in the 1980's will remain constant. Colleges will continue to offer credit instruction, continuing education, remedial and developmental programs, and extensive community services. But significant changes will occur resulting from demography, societal attitudes and even in some situations, the struggle for institutional survival.

We know that no longer is public higher education, or even the newest manifestation of the American dream, the local community college, held in high esteem for its mere existence. The community college concept and individual institutions will be called on repeatedly to demonstrate and prove their worth.

Everyone connected with these institutions must understand and appreciate that excellent instruction, responsive programming and quality support services are essential. Colleges that have deficiencies in any of these areas must begin active corrective actions immediately. No longer can we talk about excellence of instruction and services, but spend most of our creative energy building new buildings. Few colleges will enjoy the luxury of being able to point with pride to new campuses constructed in the foreseeable future. What we will need to do is continue the process of recruiting, developing and nurturing excellent faculties and staffs—the key to excellent instruction, and to continue the process of refining our programs of study and our

methods of instruction. The pace and glamour will be very different for community college staffs, trustees and advisory councils during the 1980's.

Community college presidents and their senior staff members will have to work very hard to keep their institutions dynamic in the face of declining enrollment, shrinking financial resources and a wave of public disenchantment against any institution that expends public money. These difficulties will be exacerbated by the seemingly growing reluctance of all in our society, including community college faculty and staff, to agree to be led by anyone.

"A strategy for institutional excellence defined in local terms, must be carefully conceived, developed and implemented by every college that desires to remain a vital force in its community."

A strategy for institutional excellence defined in local terms, must be carefully conceived, developed and implemented by every college that desires to remain a vital force in its community. All of the traditional mechanisms to gain and hold public support must be continued, refined and expanded. Other public and private institutions have recognized the value of certain aspects of the community college mission and are attempting to assume some of the activities. As is their right in a democratic society, some members of the community will even question the basic mission of the community college as well as its innovative and outreach programs on several levels, philosophical and practical. Institutional wellbeing and advancement will require not only instructional and programmatic excellence, but also a well conceived, continuous and systematic program of public information to foster and maintain support for the institution. In short, a community college must have a public or community relations program of the first order to be able to keep its place in the community. Presidents will need the assistance of the professional collegiate public information officers.

It goes without saying that the president's personal commitment is key to an effective and contiuous community information program. The president personally is, and must be, the chief spokesman for the college. The president must, however, recognize the value of a planned program to influence and maintain public opinion and the importance of the professional public information officer to that plan. The president must be committed to creating the climate and the structural mechanism for that officer to function on the campus. The president must insure that adequate resources are available and he must lead the total institution to an acceptance of the notion that an information program is more than worth the time, resources and effort.

"The chief community information staff person must be assigned a new status in the organization. This person must be a senior staff person with appropriate rank and salary, must be a member of the senior management team, present when all major institutional decisions are being made, and must have the opportunity to influence the decision making process relative to the impact that these decisions will make on public opinion."

It is obvious that money and human resources must be expended to make a comprehensive community information program work. Perhaps not as obvious, initially, is the recognition that the chief community information staff person must be assigned a new status in the organization. This person must be a senior staff person with appropriate rank and salary, must be a member of the senior management team, present when all major institutional decisions are being made, and must have the opportunity to influence the decision making process relative to the impact that these decisions will make on public opinion. The overriding function of this person is to help the institution interpret itself to the community. Because of the sensitivity of the position, it is equally obvious that the individual must have the complete confidence of the president.

These assertions of what is required for an institution to benefit most from the services of a professional public information officer are not new. Many presidents recognize the need but the people who typically have been employed are young, inexperienced and lacking in maturity. Because of these characteristics, not only does it seem inappropriate to assign a high rank and salary, but also to assume that the individual should join the senior management team and can be helpful. A vicious circle is established that has tended to place and keep the public information officer at the lowest level of the administrative scale. The initial change in this cycle can only be effected by the president. When the change is made, the action will not be accepted well on most established campuses. Ca[illegible]s administrators, especially in the academic areas, ar[illegible]ely to misinterpret the move, begrudge the added expenditures of funds and not see any long range benefits. Since the position was not needed in the past at a very high level, it will be argued, why is it necessary for the future? The basic response must be that the responsibilities of the function must be radically changed for the 80 s.

In addition to maintaining all of the functions public relations officers have traditionally performed on college campuses relative to publications and media, the public information officer must be able to give counsel that is heard and heeded about the potential impact of proposed actions in the community before they occur. Too few senior management groups contain public information officers. Contemplated college actions are not analyzed by public information officers for the possible and probable community reaction. Too few public information officers are sufficiently connected with and schooled in a studied understanding of the community to be able to predict outcomes with any type of certainty.

This type of analysis is precisely what is necessary. The primary function of the public information office is to interpret the activities of the college to the commu-

nity and also to help interpret and predict the pulse of the community to the college. The purpose of the public information program is to systematize this exchange of information and understanding and, to the degree possible, to influence the formation of public opinion. The public information program that works to maintain a positive institutional image is much more than a continuous flow of press releases or even a well thought out advertising program for a new curriculum or course. It is certainly much more than a marketing campaign for a new semester. It is a constant creative effort led by people trained in communication, and community, to know about the community being served and to guide the college in its effort to relate to that community.

The senior public information officer must be more than a writer or even a more generalized communicator with experience in several communications media. The ideal person must have the ability to think like, and in fact be, an institutional decision maker who is grounded in the basic skills and talents of communications and human relations. The basic function is to interpret the institution to its public. An individual does that best if the decision making process is understood and if the substantive issues and concerns that make up the decision are internalized by the public information officer. The management team, and especially the president, needs a professional appraisal of what public opinion will be to proposed actions before they occur. The important contribution of the public information officer to the councils of senior administators is a studied indication of what will be the probable response of specific segments of the community if proposed actions or initiatives are undertaken. This function is obviously very difficult and requires sensitivity and judgment. The new type of public information officer cannot be an impartial member of the fourth estate who reports what happens—if it is newsworthy. In critical situations that have long range impact, the most serious effect of actions are not what the "masses" know or believe, but rather how specific relatively small target segments of the community feel. These target segments include such people as business or labor leaders, politicians, school superintendents, guidance counselors, and leaders of civic, social and ethnic groups. It is obvious that each of these selected segments is influenced by mass public opinion, but this influence may be many times removed. The institution must be sensitive to these segments and the public information officer must be able not only to know and predict responses, but also to be able to work with these groups to mold opinion. The public information officer must be of sufficient standing in the community to be able to accurately reflect the views, beliefs and aspirations of the institution, its board of trustees and its senior officers.

"The important contribution of the public information officer to the councils of senior administrators is a studied indication of what will be the probable response of specific segments of the community if proposed actions or intiatives are undertaken."

This need of the public information officer to be an institutional spokesman is a key change in role. As previously stated, it is axiomatic that the president is the chief spokesman for the college and is therefore its chief public interpreter. The president, however, of a complex and dynamic community college cannot and should not be the sole voice for the institution. The community college of the 1980's should not be equated to one person. One of the major changes that must occur in the public information process of many institutions is to stop equating the institution to the personage of the president. In the formative years of many colleges, the president was the personification of the institution. This is understandable, for founding presidents are usually strong and colorful individuals who make good copy. In the absence of any other focus at the institution the person becomes the institution. The public information program of the maturing community college should be institutionalized. Public statements and public exposure should be shared by appropriate individuals throughout the institution and this sharing should be orchestrated by the public information officer. The art of timing and appropriateness are central to a solid public information program. The public information officer's responsibility is to attempt to determine who are the appropriate spokesmen for the given situation. While the president may need to make some public statements by virtue of office, many other interactions with the several publics of the college may be done most effectively and efficiently by other people, including the chief public information officer. Therefore, this person must have the skill to present the institution appropriately.

"The president and the senior management team must look to the public information officer for advice and counsel in the area of public information and public relations in the same way they look to the in-house college expert in curriculum, instruction or finance for information and guidance."

Most simply stated, the president and the senior management team must look to the public information officer for advice and counsel in the area of public information and public relations in the same way they look to the in-house college expert in curriculum, instruction or finance for information and guidance. A person is not an expert in communicating and opinion molding merely because he is an expert in English, mathematics or another academic discipline.

As was stated, at most community colleges, presidents are beginning to recognize, at least intellectually, that they need and the institutions need the services of these professionals. However, the relationships between presidents and their public information officers are not always good. And the reasons are understandable. Since public information issues are so centrally related to the individual management style of the president and to the

personal success of the president, a reluctance to be completely open is understandable by both individuals. This openness and willingness to share the good and the bad must exist if the president is to benefit fully from the professional talents of the public information officer. Since this audience contains many public information officers, I feel obliged to state what is obvious to most presidents. If an open relationship is to exist, the president must be assured of the public information officer's complete loyalty. If you cannot support your president in this manner, I believe that it is important for the institution that you either leave his employ or get him fired, but do either with great speed. Next to the president's secretary, there is no individual more important on the president's personal staff.

Also, on a very practical and operational level, it is obvious that the public information officer be recognized by vice presidents and deans as a decision maker. This role is very often resisted strongly by these senior administrators and the relationship between them and the public information officer is often very strained, caused I believe, because of the basic difference between how typical educational administrators and typical public information officers are trained and earn advancement in their positions. These differences in philosophy, values and training must be reconciled and the president must clearly set the tone for the recognition of mutually important but differing skills and abilities.

In summary, in a publicly supported institution which must not only serve its students but must also win budgetary support from some type of elected body of local officials, it is not sufficient to stand on the institutional record if that record is not presented to the people in the best ways possible. In short, community colleges need the guidance and counsel of professional public information officers and these officers need to operate as one of the most important members of the president's staff. The public information position for the 80's will not be that of the cub reporter turning out public interest stories about the college, it must rather be a position held by an individual capable of analyzing, interpreting, predicting and giving guidance about the public's reactions to the institution as well as managing a dynamic public information program. Walter Lipman once described dealing with public opinion as comparable to boxing with fog. If this is true, and if public opinion will be as important in the 1980's to the wellbeing of the community college as it now appears, it is obvious that community colleges need very talented public information professionals.

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